

## Community news

## Omnitsky Kosher Foods owners fret about future

Survival of only Winnipeg kosher butcher shop in question, after withdrawal of vaad license

By MATT BELLAN

Traffic was light in Omnitsky Kosher Foods July 31.

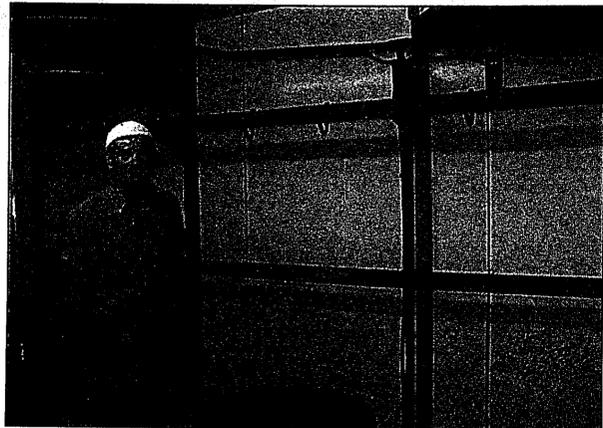
Sam Gekht, co-owner of that lone Winnipeg kosher butcher shop and food store for the past five years, escorted a visitor to the freezer.

The huge, cold room was completely empty - in contrast to the previous week, when a Winnipeg Free Press photographer saw Gekht standing beside big sides of beef stamped kosher.

The Vaad Ha'ir, the body regulating kashrut in Winnipeg, July 14 withdrew the license it granted that 84-year-old kosher butcher shop. And in an ad in the Winnipeg Free Press the next day, it notified the public of that move.

"Please be advised that effective July 14, 2006, Omnitsky Kosher Foods, 1428 Main St., Wpg. is no longer under the supervision of the Vaad Ha'ir of Winnipeg (WK)," the ad said.

"Accordingly, none of the products produced or sold by Omnitsky Kosher Foods may now be



SAM GEKHT in the empty freezer of Omnitsky Kosher Foods July 31: "They never spelled out what was wrong with the slaughter at Blumenort," Gekht said of the Vaad Ha'ir.

accepted as being certified as Kosher by the Vaad Ha'ir of Winnipeg, and any packaging or new labelling still bearing the WK symbol on any product produced by Omnitsky's on or after July 14, 2006 is unauthorized and invalid."

A story featured prominently in the Winnipeg Free Press July 18, headlined "Kosher butcher loses license", brought the certificate cancellation even wider public attention.

Asked why the vaad was cancelling his certificate, Gekht told The Jewish Post &amp; News July 31, after agreeing to a request for an interview: "They said, because I didn't sign the license - no more supervision. I thought: 'They could have waited until the license expired.'"

Why was the vaad pulling Gekht's license?

"They never said specifically," Gekht answered, sitting at the front of his store, which still has plenty of canned goods and other food products for sale. "They just said 'this is a new standard - we're on a historic mission to elevate (kashrut) standards...'"

Gekht added that the vaad's efforts in this area have been going on for several years.

But "they never spelled out what was wrong with the slaughter at Blumenort," he said, referring to the rural Manitoba plant where kosher slaughter has been taking place for years, under vaad supervision.

Gekht added that he was told a few weeks earlier that Rabbi Mitchell Cohen of



The rest of the store was still full of canned and other kosher food for sale, and a new shipment of kosher beef from Toronto later went on sale.

Ottawa, executive director of Canadian Kosher Inc., whom the vaad has hired as a consultant, would visit Omnitsky's, to demonstrate how to do "the proper salting and rinsing" there - on grounds that Omnitsky's is doing that incorrectly. But since then, Cohen has "changed his mind", Gekht claimed.

"In his latest correspondence, he said: 'We're not going to do (the slaughtering and kashering) here.'"

Instead, the vaad was now asking Gekht to import all his beef from two kosher wholesalers in Toronto, and advised him it would try to get a better price for him from at least one of the Toronto kosher beef wholesalers.

"That meat is already kashered and salted and soaked," Gekht said. "It's coming in fresh, in plastic airtight bags."

He added, however, that it would take considerably longer to reach his shop than beef slaughtered in Manitoba.

"It takes five days from the time they ship it," Gekht said, adding that that comes to "six days", from the time he places his order.

Meat slaughtered in Blumenort, in contrast, took only "a day or two" to arrive at his shop.

As for what the imported Toronto beef would cost him, Gekht said: "The cost increase from Toronto is (now) double what it costs us" to buy meat slaughtered in Manitoba.

The fees the vaad has been charging his store were also an issue for Gekht, and one of the main reasons he hadn't renewed his contract, when the deadline came, June 10.

"The increase in that contract would be 287 per cent."

The previous increase the vaad asked for, and Gekht agreed to, was 575 per cent.

"My total (fee) increase in five years with the Vaad Ha'ir, is 1,277 per cent, since I started."

Gekht said he's already started importing meat from one of the Toronto wholesalers.

Asked how his customers have been reacting, since news first broke about the vaad's withdrawal of his kashrut license, Gekht said July 31: "Some customers are still coming."

He added, however, that "people are complaining. Meat is already expensive."

Gekht feels some Orthodox rabbis here are "trying to impose their Orthodox standards on the Winnipeg Jewish population. Most of our customers are Conservative - older people. They're very happy with what's been offered."

Gekht added, however, that the vaad was trying to negotiate a better wholesale price for him with one of the Toronto firms. "Right now, we're waiting for the vaad to say they're going to make a better deal with Shefa. If not, I'll probably have to close the store, if they don't give me a (Cont. on page 3. See "Omnitsky's")

## Community news

Omnitsky's

(Cont. from page 2.) Gekht and his wife, Ina, co-owner of the shop, called The Jewish Post &amp; News last Friday, August 4 with new concerns after the vaad offered another revision of its May 30 contract with their store.

"They (the vaad) produced a contrast yesterday that imposes even more stringent conditions than even the previous contract (proposal), with more costs for Omnitsky's," Mrs. Gekht said.

Among other things, the revised contract requires the store to use only slaughterers approved by Cohen.

The contract adds that the slaughterers used by Omnitsky's must know salting and de-veining techniques, as approved by Mitchell, and that Omnitsky's must provide "a proper room" for salting and de-veining of meat.

"They're also asking to put us on a probationary period to ensure there are no kashrut violations....So I guess the slaughterers we've used for past 40 years haven't been licensed according to (Mitchell's and the vaad's) standards."

"The total package, with all these (new) conditions, for sure, will cost us over \$2,000 additional per month" more than previous vaad fees of "about \$1100 per month." "That will have to come out of our own pockets."

Sam Gekht conceded August 4 that customers were still shopping at Omnitsky's, and that he'd sold "three-quarters" of a "small front" of beef he'd imported that week from a Toronto kosher wholesaler.

"Customers are still buying, because they don't have a choice," he added. "I sold it at a loss."

Mrs. Gekht said she and her husband would now turn to the media on a larger scale to tell their side of the story.

## VAAD PRESIDENT RESPONDS

Aronovitch, longtime vaad president, said in a longdistance phone interview August 4 that he's been trying to tighten kashrut standards in Winnipeg for years, including his time as president of the Winnipeg Jewish Community Council (WJCC) in the 1990s.

"It sounds like the vaad and Omnitsky's are sparring, but that's not the case," he said, while

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DON ARONOVITCH, president, Vaad Ha'ir of Winnipeg: The vaad has been trying to raise kashrut standards here with endorsement of "all rabbis and synagogues in town, so that we're on a standard with other communities in Canada and North America."

America," Aronovitch added. "We're the only community to have kosher standards not at this national level."

Winnipeg's Orthodox Jewish community has for decades ordered food from out of town, because it's dissatisfied with local kashrut standards.

Aronovitch recalled a national educators' conference the WJCC held in the early 1990s, and visits by some Israeli dignitaries, where they refused to eat meals at local events, and had to have special meals "shrinkwrapped", and imported from out of town.

"We felt - if we're going to have a standard, it should be a standard everyone can live with."

Aronovitch claimed Mr. Gekht was fully aware of the vaad's plans to upgrade kashrut standards in the community when he and his wife took over Omnitsky's.

"WE CHARGED THEM \$5,000 A YEAR"

Asked to respond to Gekht's claim that vaad fees for Omnitsky's have risen "1225 per cent" since he and his wife assumed ownership, Aronovitch said percentage figures, by themselves, mean very little.

"If you charge \$1, and increase it to \$5, you can say that's a 500 per cent increase."

"We charged them \$5,000 a year," he said of the vaad's last contract with Omnitsky's. Meanwhile, "we estimate our costs were \$30,000 a year."

Aronovitch said the vaad gets just "modest funding" from Federation - "\$5,000 a year". It also received a "supplemental grant" last year to hire Rabbi Cohen as consultant.

"We run a business that has to break even," Aronovitch said. "There's no public funding - no fundraising."

"We had a four-year contract with (the Gekhts) we lived with. We're now trying to recover our costs."

As for the "safety" of kosher meat the vaad wants Omnitsky's to import from Ontario, Aronovitch insisted there are "no safety concerns", and that the meat is "even better, because it's seasoned."

Aronovitch and the vaad also believe costs to the consumer "should not increase" with importing of all kosher meat from out of town.

As for alternatives, if Omnitsky won't sign a new contract with the vaad, "we've had an indication from another potential supplier. I'm personally committed to ensuring fresh kosher meat is provided to Winnipeg consumers at a reason-

able price."

The alternatives include arranging for two other local retailers to import kosher meat from Toronto, wholesale.

Aronovitch said the vaad doesn't look at Gekht's financial records, and doesn't know "what his costs are." Asked whether he'd be willing to inspect those records, and doublecheck Gekht's vaad-related expenses, Aronovitch said it's not up to him to "audit" Gekht's books.

But many Winnipeg kosher food consumers here that have been importing food from out of town would "buy in Winnipeg if they could."

"His volume could increase appreciably." Aronovitch hopes "Sam will be part of the solution, but I'm not involved in his business."

## JEWISH FEDERATION OF WINNIPEG

## FACT OF THE WEEK

Week 10

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